

## Message Text

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PAGE 01 THE HA 02221 01 OF 02 212226Z  
ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10  
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11  
/066 W

-----003326 212312Z /63

R 201543Z APR 78  
FM AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2483  
INFO AMEMBASSY BONN  
AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS  
AMEMBASSY LONDON

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 THE HAGUE 2221

E.O. 11652: N/A  
TAGS: PINT, NL  
SUBJ: NETHERLANDS PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

REF: A) THE HAGUE 1704; B) THE HAGUE 1879

SUMMARY: THE BOTTOM LINE OF THE RECENT PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS  
IS THAT THEY HAVE SUBSTANTIALLY STRENGTHENED THE CENTER-RIGHT  
COALITION GOVERNMENT OF PRIME MINISTER VAN AGT. END SUMMARY

1. THE MARCH 29 PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS (REF A) CAPPED A POLITICAL  
BUILD-UP OF UNUSUAL PROPORTIONS. NORMALLY, PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS  
IN THE NETHERLANDS ARE ONLY MODERATELY SIGNIFICANT, DEAL WITH  
SECONDARY ISSUES AND COMMAND LESS PUBLIC ATTENTION THAN NATIONAL  
ELECTIONS. THIS TIME, HOWEVER, CIRCUMSTANCES COMBINED TO GIVE  
THEM MORE PROMINENCE. FIRST, THEY WERE HELD WITHIN A YEAR OF  
THE MAY 1977 NATIONAL ELECTIONS AND ONLY MONTHS AFTER A NEW  
CENTER-RIGHT COALITION TOOK OFFICE. SECOND, THE NARROW PARLIA-  
MENTARY MAJORITY OF THE GOVERNMENT ENHANCED INTEREST IN THE  
ELECTION OUTCOME. MOST IMPORTANT, HOWEVER, NATIONAL POLITICAL  
LEADERS GAVE PROMINENCE TO THE ELECTION, TRAVELING ABOUT THE  
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PAGE 02 THE HA 02221 01 OF 02 212226Z

COUNTRY WITH CAMPAIGN ORATORY THAT WOULD HAVE LED OUTSIDERS  
TO BELIEVE THAT IMPORTANT NATIONAL ISSUES WERE AT STAKE.

2. WITH SUCH A BUILD-UP THE RESULTS ALSO ACQUIRED EXTRA WEIGHT.  
MOST SIGNIFICANT WAS THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS  
(CDA) AS THE LARGEST PARTY, RECAPTURING THIS POSITION FROM THE  
SOCIALISTS, WHO HAD EMERGED ON TOP IN 1977. ALSO, DESPITE LIBERAL

(VVD) LOSES, THE COALITION AS A WHOLE GAINED STRENGTH. THE RESULT HAS BEEN WIDELY READ AS STRENGTHENING THE CURRENT CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT-LIBERAL GOVERNMENT AND GIVING IT A MORE SECURE AND LONGER LEASE ON LIFE.

3. CDA GAINS CONTINUED THE UPWARD TREND ALREADY EVIDENT LAST YEAR. THIS TREND REVERSES THE LONG AND STEADY DECLINE OF VOTES FOR THE CHRISTIAN PARTIES WHICH WAS PARTICULARLY NOTICEABLE IN THE '60'S WITH SEVERAL RESULTS. FIRST, CDA LEADERS HAVE UNDERSTANDABLY BEEN BUOYED UP. FOLLOWING THE ELECTIONS, PRIME MINISTER VAN AGT HAS BEEN SHOWING THE COUNTRY THE NEW FACE OF A LEADER WITH INCREASED CONFIDENCE. VAN AGT IS ALSO BEGINNING TO SHOW THAT HE ENJOYS BEING PRIME MINISTER. SECOND, THE ELECTION RESULTS WILL FACILITATE THE MERGER OF THE CDA FEDERATION INTO A UNITARY PARTY. THIRD, THE CDA--LIKE THE OLD KVP BEFORE IT--HAS REINFORCED ITS COMFORTABLE POSITION IN THE MIDDLE OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM IN THE NETHERLANDS. NO GOVERNMENT CAN BE FORMED WITHOUT IT. WHILE ALL THIS IS TRUE FOR NOW, A LARGE QUESTION REMAINS NEVERTHELESS WHETHER IN THE LONG RUN THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS CAN MAINTAIN THIS POSITION. DECONFESSIONALIZATION CONTINUES AS CHURCH LEADERS FACE DECLINING CONGREGATIONS. THE CDA PLATFORM, MOREOVER, LACKS COHESION. ALSO, BY BEING IN THE MIDDLE, THE CDA IS VULNERABLE.

4. THE SLIGHT DROP OF THE LIBERAL PARTY REINFORCES ITS ROLE AS THE JUNIOR COALITION PARTY. BUT LIBERAL LEADERS ARE NOT TOO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 THE HA 02221 01 OF 02 212226Z

DISAPPOINTED. THEY EXPECTED SOME LOSSES, PARTLY BECAUSE OF THEIR LESSENED VISIBILITY NOW THAT THEY ARE IN THE GOVERNMENT AND PARTLY BECAUSE SOME OF THE SUPPORT THEY RECEIVED IN 1977 AS A PROTEST VOTE HAS NOW RETURNED TO THE CDA. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ELECTIONS FOR THE VVD LIES IN THE CONFIRMATION OF THE FACT THAT IT HAS BECOME A NATIONAL PARTY WITH A SUBSTANTIAL AND APPARENTLY STEADY FOLLOWING. IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT THIS PERCEPTION WILL HELP SOFTEN THE SHARP AND OFTEN STRIDENT TONE WHICH FORMER VVD FLOOR LEADER WIEGEL USED IN CHALKING UP SUCCESSFUL GAINS (16 SEATS IN 1971, 22 SEATS IN 1972, AND 28 IN 1977). INDEED, THE IMAGE AND TONE OF THE NEW VVD FLOOR LEADER, RIETKERK, HAS ATTRACTED A GOOD DEAL OF ATTENTION AS A HARBINGER OF A SOFTER AND MORE MODULATED APPROACH CALCULATED TO HAVE AN EVEN WIDER APPEAL.

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PAGE 01 THE HA 02221 02 OF 02 212304Z  
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 2 OF 2 THE HAGUE 2221

5. PARADOXICALLY, DESPITE FURTHER PVDA GAINS WHICH CEMENTED THE ALREADY IMPRESSIVE ELECTORAL ADVANCES OF 1977, THE PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS CONSTITUTED A SETBACK TO THE SOCIALIST PARTY. ONCE AGAIN, THEY ARE BACK IN SECOND PLACE. THEY ARE FACING A COALITION WHICH IS STRONGER AND MORE SELF-CONFIDENT. THE PROSPECT OF UPSETTING THE COALITION AND RECAPTURING THE GOVERNMENT HAS RECEDED. THE PARTY IS STILL DIGESTING THE MISTAKES WHICH KEPT IT OUT OF THE GOVERNMENT AFTER WINNING THE 1977 ELECTIONS. THE LONGER IT REMAINS IN OPPOSITION, THE MORE DIFFICULT IT WILL BE FOR FORMER PRIME MINISTER DEN UYL TO MAINTAIN HIS POSITION AS PARTY LEADER (REF B) AND THE MORE LIKELY WILL BE A FIGHT FOR LEADERSHIP WHICH, GIVEN THE NUMBER OF ACTIVE AND COMPETITIVE CANDIDATES, MAY BE BRUISING.

6. WHILE IT IS OUR CONCLUSION THAT THE ELECTIONS HAVE STRENGTHENED PRIME MINISTER VAN AGT'S HOLD ON THE GOVERNMENT, THERE IS ONE IMPORTANT CAVEAT. THIS RELATES TO THE POSITION OF CDA FLOOR LEADER AANTJES, WHO, WITH A NUMBER OF OTHER CDA MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT, DECLINED TO SUBSCRIBE FORMALLY TO THE PLATFORM OF THE COALITION (77 THE HAGUE 6383). AANTJES HAS ALWAYS TENDED MORE TOWARD THE SOCIALISTS THAN TO THE LIBERALS, PARTICULARLY IN MATTERS INVOLVING

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PAGE 02 THE HA 02221 02 OF 02 212304Z

SOCIAL LEGISLATION. THE VAN AGT GOVERNMENT THIS YEAR FACES A NUMBER OF DIFFICULT PIECES OF LEGISLATION IN THIS AREA. THE SUPPORT OF AANTJES WILL BE ESSENTIAL. WHILE IT MAY BE EXPECTED THAT HE WILL USE HIS CONSIDERABLE LEVERAGE TO SHAPE LEGISLATION TO HIS LIKING, FAILURE TO TAKE HIS POINT OF VIEW SUFFICIENTLY INTO ACCOUNT MIGHT CAUSE THE DEFECTION OF SOME OF THE CDA INDEPENDENTS. THIS COULD HAPPEN SUDDENLY. THUS, WHILE STRONGER AS A RESULT OF

THEPROVINCIAL ELECTIONS,PRIME MINISTER VAN AGT STILL MUST EXERCISE  
GREAT CARE IN MANAGING HIS COALITION.  
BROWN

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